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## The Importance of Ethics, Moral and Professional Skills of Novice Teachers

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### Abstract

Soft skills especially ethics, moral and professional skill play an important role in sharpening individual's excellent personality by complementing his/her hard skills to the teacher communities. The complicated nature of teaching, in both practice and preparation, encourages teacher educators to explore the complexity of the novice teachers' experiences and identify the concerns they face in their induction year. This study aims to examine the ethics, moral and professional skill of novice teachers in secondary schools of Malaysia from the views of their administrators. In addition, findings are triangulated by the self-rating data done by novice teachers themselves on this particular skill. The main purpose of this study is to explain and interpret the practice of ethics, moral and professional skill from the two different perspectives. This study employed qualitative method using focus group interviews to collect data from 31 administrators and quantitative method using self-rating questionnaire from 250 novice teachers. Among the seven soft skills components which comprised of communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership, quantitative finding showed that ethics, moral and professional skill has been rated as second least needed after entrepreneurship skill in the workplace according to novice teachers. However, quantitative finding found to be contradicted with qualitative data. School administrators stated that soft skill components are the most needed and most of the novice teachers are lacking of is ethics, moral and professional skill. In conclusion, keeping abreast of developments in teacher education would ensure that novice teachers remain current and relevant in their profession, and that novice teachers be equipped with necessary ethics, moral and professional skill to survive in an increasingly complex teaching environment.

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## 1. Introduction

Under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (The Economic Planning Unit, 2006), human capital development is one of the priority areas in the country's development agenda. Following the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the Minister of Higher Education announced that public universities in Malaysia must introduce soft skill components and incorporate them in the syllabus. Soft skills are behavior that must be internalized as a natural aspect of a person's repertoire of social skills and character attributes. Embedding within new workplace competitors, the capacity to behave appropriately requires opportunities to experience and practice each new skill until they are well within each worker's comfort zone (ODEP, 2010).

Soft skills are defined as the relevant qualities and skills that lead to effective job performance. There are seven soft skills identified by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia which need to be embedded in the curriculum of Higher Education Institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006). Ethics, moral and professional skill is one of seven soft skill components comprised of communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership skill.

Ethics, moral and professional skill is defined as novice teachers who possessed this skill are able to practice with high moral standards in the relevant professional practice. They should also be able to understand the effects of economy, environment, and socio-cultural factors on their respective professional practice. In relation to ethical issues, novice teachers should be able to analyse and arrive at decisions in matters concerning ethics. Beyond the working environment, novice teachers should be able to practice good ethics while having a sense of responsibility toward society (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

In the working environment, hard skills normally refer to technical procedures or practical tasks that are typically easy to observe, quantify, and measure. Training of such skills for novice teachers is relatively easy given that they have acquired the necessary knowledge in university (Shakir, 2009). In contrast, soft skills which are normally referred as 'people skills', are not easily taught although they are very much needed in the working life especially ethics, moral and professional skill.

## 2. Statement of the problem

The lack of understanding on soft skills fostered or developed among teacher trainees and university graduates (novice teachers) in the country. A better understanding of the soft skills is required by teacher educators and researchers. The empirical data of soft skills can be used as a proof to convince educational policies makers on the importance of acquiring soft skills among teacher trainees as well as teachers. As such, more researches have to carry out to explore the area of soft skills is therefore useful and needed.

The teaching and learning of 'hard skills' are made easier with a common entrance standard, uniform syllabus and evaluation system. However the development of soft skills specifically ethics, moral and professional skill amongst teacher trainees remains a difficult task as it involves less measurable elements and varies highly with each individual according to their character and background (Shakir, 2009). The lack of ethics, moral and professional skill amongst the novice teachers is partly attributed to the 'rote learning' style adopted by Malaysian learners to excel academically as a result of the examination-based education system (Ahmad, 1998). Thus, teacher trainees resort to memorizing facts and figures to excel as their success in university is constantly assessed by how many A's they achieved in their examinations. Consequently, teaching professional training process fails to develop an inquisitive mind and analytical skills.

Given the belief that novice teachers often over rate themselves in believing that they are well qualified and do not lack any necessary skills coupled by the belief that soft skills like ethics, moral and professional are part of personal traits that is not possible to be enhanced (Shakir, 2009). Therefore, awareness related to the importance of ethics, moral and professional skill must be created to teacher trainees on the needs and expectation of the globalized job market. Acknowledging this fact, these traits should be part of characteristics possessed by the novice teachers when they leave university and enter to workplace.

There is a groundswell of demand from educational institutions to prepare university graduates for the workplace that preferred by today's employers (Reio & Sutton, 2006). Investigations on the acquired soft skills of teacher

trainees as well as to take steps in furnishing teacher trainees with the required soft skills are very much needed to close the shortage gap of soft skills among teacher trainees when they enter their workplace as novice teachers. Organizations need to re-examine their present practices of human resources to make sure that the contribution of their workforce is still relevant to the organisation's success and competitiveness.

### 3. Research objectives

The following are the main objectives of this study:

- a) To assess the components of soft skills namely communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership skill that needed by novice teachers in their workplace by self rating.
- b) To assess the components of soft skills namely communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership skill that gained by novice teachers from teaching professional training by self rating.
- c) To study the components of soft skills namely communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership skill that needed by novice teachers in their workplace from administrators' points of view.

### 4. Methodology

Researchers utilized mixed mode method to collect data in two phases, namely phase 1 and 2. In phase 1, a survey research design using questionnaire involving a sample of 250 novice teachers who have graduated not more than three years from five identified public universities in Malaysia. In phase 2, a total of 31 school administrators involved in focus group interviews who are the immediate leaders of the respondents in phase 1, by employing case study design. Focus group interviews are conducted in four groups. A purposive sampling was employed for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The questionnaire was consisted of 58 items including 6 items of demographic information and 52 items related to soft skills needed and gained by novice teachers. The focus group interview questions comprised of four questions encompassing what are the components of soft skills most needed by novice teachers, which components of soft skills that novice teachers are lacking of, identifying critical issues caused by the particular component of soft skills, and any in-service training provided by schools to novice teachers.

### 5. Findings

#### 5.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

Results based on Table 1 show respondents' self-rated on the level of soft skills that needed by novice teachers in their workplace. Team work skill found to be most needed in their workplace, followed by communicative skill, leadership skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, lifelong learning and management of information, and ethics, moral and professional skill. The least needed component of soft skills is entrepreneurship skill.

Table 1. Level of soft skills needed by novice teachers in their workplace

Soft skills	Mean score	Standard deviation
Team work	4.36	0.60
Communication	4.29	0.60
Leadership	4.25	0.73
Critical thinking and problem solving	4.22	0.65
Lifelong learning and management information	4.21	0.70
Ethics, moral, and professional	4.18	0.68
Entrepreneurship	4.07	0.76

Results based on Table 2 show respondents' self-rated on the level of soft skills that gained by novice teachers from teaching professional training. Team work and communicative skills found to be the two major components of soft skills that they gained from teaching professional training, followed by lifelong learning and management of information, leadership skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, critical thinking and problem solving skills. Entrepreneurship skill found to be not popular in their teaching professional training.

Table 2. Level of soft skills gained by novice teachers from teaching professional training

Soft skills	Mean score	Standard deviation
Team work	4.15	0.54
Communication	4.03	0.51
Lifelong learning and management information	4.01	0.65
Leadership	3.98	0.72
Ethics, moral, and professional	3.94	0.65
Critical thinking and problem solving	3.89	0.55
Entrepreneurship	3.80	0.75

## 5.2. Focus group interviews

Results from the administrators' points of view related to component of soft skills that most needed by novice teachers to carry out the tasks in the workplace is ethics, moral and professional skill. This is followed by communicative skill, critical thinking and problem solving skill, team work skill, and leadership skill. According to their administrators, novice teachers are very lacking of ethics, moral and professional skill, thus they are not committed to their job and refuse to take responsibilities. Critical issues derived from this ethics, moral and professional skill are they fail to be role model to their students, fail to achieve school goal, increase workload to their colleagues and school administrators. Administrators found that in-service training not really can help to improve this ethics, moral and professional skill.

Majority of the administrators suggested that teacher trainees should undertake a periodic industrial training throughout the four years of teaching professional training period. Teacher trainees who have been identified as lacking in soft skills can be encouraged to undertake an informal industrial training at the end of year 2 of their studies. This is, however, an additional to the formal industrial training undertaken at the end of the training. Apart from gaining practical experience, teacher trainees will realize the importance of possessing a certain level of soft skills as they have an 'early preview' of what is expected out of them.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Findings indicated that novice teachers are not aware of their shortcomings, therefore they do not consider ethics, moral and professional skill is an important soft skill that they have to practice in the workplace. From the self-rating result showed that novice teachers rated this ethics, moral and professional skill as the second least important soft skills after entrepreneurship skill that needed in their workplace. In addition, novice teachers revealed that they gained this soft skill from their teaching professional training but still not sufficient to practice in their workplace, mean score of gained level (mean score = 3.94) of this soft skill is lower than needed level (mean score = 4.18). Hence, teacher trainees must identify their weaknesses and limitations and take the opportunity to acquire as much good traits as possible during their teaching professional training. Meanwhile, teacher educators in university have to prepare them for the demanding job market.

Results from quantitative finding found to be contradicted with qualitative data. School administrators stated that soft skill component that is most needed and most of the novice teachers are lacking of is ethics, moral and professional skill. Possessing what is takes to be an ethical teacher can be a difficult task for many teachers especially to the novice teachers. This is because this ethics, moral and professional skill will require an ethical decision when he/she encounters unsuspecting events on a daily basis, which may not be the exact right answer. Hopefully, it will be the ethical answer. This decision making is a great responsibility placed on novice teachers, no matter how long one has been in the profession. One can only hope that the years or months of teachings has taught novice teachers enough to know what to do when ethical dilemmas occur in the classroom or within the school system (Burrell, 2009).

The effort to enhance soft skills like ethics, moral and professional skill amongst teacher trainees to prepare them for the globalized job market should be a joint effort between the teacher trainees, teacher educators, faculties, colleges of residence, and universities. More importantly, teacher trainees must be made to realize the importance of enhancing their soft skills so that they are able to compete in the world without boundaries. While suggestions on infusing soft skills have been planned by the Institute of Higher Learning, the evaluation of these elements specifically on ethics, moral and professional skill is left to the academic. Currently, there are no guidelines on how to assess the level of ethics, moral and professional skill amongst teacher trainees although some educational faculties have adopted their own approach.

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